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The Stranger by Charles Baudelaire

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Kent Dixon
The Stranger

Charles Baudelaire
L'Étranger

“Whom do you love the best, enigmatic man? Tell me. Your father, your mother, your sister or your brother?

—I have neither father nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.

—Your friends?

—You use a word there whose sense leaves me clueless to this day.

—Your country then?

—I don't even know which latitude it resides in.

—Beauty?

—Beauty, capital B? I would love her willingly, were she a goddess and immortal.

—Gold!

—I hate it as much as you hate God.

—Well! What *do* you love, extraordinary stranger?

I love the clouds,...the clouds that pass, *comme ci, comme ça*...above and beyond...the marvelous ineffable clouds!”

The word “Stranger” is a disappointing translation of the title “L’Étranger,” though the only one I’ve ever seen. This stranger is the stranger in Mark Twain’s *Mysterious Stranger*, begun, one should note, some 50 years after Baudelaire’s stranger, under the title “Chronicles of Young Satan.” Baudelaire’s outsider is alienated from either everything or almost everything, depending on how you read *là-bas...là-bas...* in the last line.

I did this translation for a reading whose majority audience would be students and “stranger” cut more to their core, I felt, delivered more adolescent spleen, was closer to home (I’ve read their journals for 30 years), than “outsider” or *anomie* or “Young Satan.” And with luck, there’d be a few French majors there, familiar with Camus’ *Meursault*.

“Closer to home” would be my next point. Baudelaire couches his colloquy in the familiar *tu/toi*. He’s talking to himself—there are double quotes around the whole poem—even if, perhaps, he surprises his own estrangement in his last line—which I will get to. But the *aimes-tu* interrogative in the first line, followed immediately by the colloquial nudge of the imperative *dis* (*dites-moi* would suit the polite authority of the interrogator, or even *dis-moi*), sets the familiar tone; then the intimacy is sustained through lines 3 and 5 by the possessive pronouns *tes* and *ta*, only to run headlong into the Stranger’s formal use of *vous* instead of the familiar *tu*: *vous vous servez de*, “you avail yourself of.” That’s a nice collision: somewhat rudely, certainly curtly, the Stranger is rejecting the *tutoiement* of the Questioner. Subtly, it puts us auditors of this dialogue slightly on guard; as well it should, for by the next *vous* our Stranger is telling his Questioner that he, the Questioner, hates God: “I hate gold like you hate God.”

That *donc* in the penultimate line (*Eh! qu’aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire étranger?*) is the French cornerstone for rationality (*je pense, donc je suis*); it is argumentative and so, so Gallic. *Si gaulois aussi* is the *extraordinaire* which has all the French breezy irony of a *formidable*. How to get to those flavors in my *mixité*: the Gallic shrug, the lower-lipped *bofl*, the finality of *donc*. The English “therefore” (*donc*) seemed lame, so I put it into the voice’s emphasis: “what *do* you love (then, therefore)”; and the very French *Eh!*, recoiling from the you-hate-God, helped me along: “Well (*eh, eh bien*), what *do* you love (...then, if you’re going to be so nasty about it)?”

And finally he replies: he loves the clouds, the passing clouds... (*là-bas... là-bas...*). *Eh bien, là* = there, and *bas* = low, down low, at/on the bottom. Put ‘em together, you get “Over-there,” “at a remove,” “far off,” “remote,” and so remote, I think, that it’s a kind of you-can’t-get-there-from-here Over-there. The *merveilleux*, I believe, actually plays down the “faraway” of *là-bas* repeated. It’s a minor note, almost a grace note, to end on, a *demi-cliché* high up on the abstraction ladder—like “wonderful” or “amazing”—that in its obviousness sends you back in the sentence for meatier stuff. In French, the irony comes through because of the triteness. Then again, *le merveilleux*, the noun, can mean the supernatural.

I therefore tried to have it all ways to Sunday: the Gallic shrug, the indifference (in my *comme ci, comme ça*), the enhancement of *là-bas* in “above and beyond,” and the boosting of the cliché “marvelous” with an illegitimate directive “ineffable.” So in my version the irony, the *tristesse*, of the clouds’ inaccessibility runs across the whole line, not just slyly oozing out of Baudelaire’s rueful *là-bas*’s. Further translator’s agony: what to do with that line on Beauty?

- *La beauté?*

- *Je l’aimerais volontiers, déesse et immortelle.*

Déesse is a noun meaning, of course, “goddess” or “stunningly beautiful woman,” and one precise translation of the line would be: “I would love her willingly, goddess and immortal.” But I got hung up on the conditional in *j’aimerais* (“I would love”)—calling for, I felt, a phantom conditional “if-then” clause, which often sets up a kind of subjunctive: “I would love her willingly if she were [a] goddess and immortal.” In other words, in my translation, she’s not. She’s a sham, a bad place to set up your altar. That’s significantly contrary to Baudelaire’s general use of women, who are at times almost redemptive and usually serve as some sort of intermediary to happiness or even grace, as for instance in the sonnet “Parfum exotique” in *Les Fleurs du mal*:

*Quand, les deux yeux fermés, en un soir chaud d’automne,
Je respire l’odeur de ton sein chaleureux...*

[“When, both my eyes closed, on a hot autumn night,
I breathe in the fragrance of your warm breasts...”]

Here he sees happy shores roll out before him (*Je vois se dérouler des rivages heureux*). But happy shores notwithstanding, you can’t just ignore that wishful conditional and, notice, neither can the catechismic interlocutor who moves quickly from goddess to gelt:

—If not beauty, what about gold?

—Gold! I hate it more than you (*vous*) hate God.

And finally, as for my technically unjustified *comme ci, comme ça* for a lazy dismissal of the ideal, I remember a Parisian concierge’s exquisite wave of her wrist in reply to my asking about a new exhibit at the Centre Pompidou in the 4th. Her hand lolled back and forth with her *comme ci, comme ça* to say in sum, “Eh, there’s some good, but aren’t we tired of him too, he’s stuck back there in time, you should go, but don’t expect atonement.”

I could have kissed her, I could have breathed in the fragrance of just her *ennui*-laden hand. Here’s to her, *déesse et immortelle*.